DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 959 IR 056 075

AUTHOR Stack, Jack
TITLE Literacy and the Inner City Child.
PUB DATE Feb 95
NOTE 5p.; In: Literacy: Traditional, Cultural, Technological. Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship (23rd, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, July 17-22, 1994); see IR 056 058.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; *Inner City; Learning Activities; *Library Role; *Library Services; *Literacy Education; Reading Interests; Reading Skills; *School Libraries; Special Needs Students; Urban Education

ABSTRACT

It is the responsibility of school librarians to provide the specialized assistance necessary to serve inner city children. Although there have been new titles depicting the life of the inner city child, these are not abundant in the library collection. School librarians must understand how children learn to read so that they can provide proper instruction. Another significant factor in the literacy development of children is modeling behaviors. Negative attitude toward reading may develop in children who come from home environments where reading is not nurtured or reinforced. Some strategies for developing literacy in inner city children include understanding their background and interests; presenting the children with a comfortable environment in which to listen and read; capturing their interests and imagination through story telling; organizing a literacy group which involves parents; encouraging them to set up a reading routine; presenting them with a variety of literature; and incorporating literacy instruction with other subject matter. (AEF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 399 959

Literacy and the Inner City Child

by
Jack Stack
Doctoral Student
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania USA

The focus of this presentation is literacy and service to the inner city child. I believe that there is a need to target these children. The vision of an inner city child is one of living in less than desirable circumstances, more than likely at or below the poverty level, and there is a good chance that they are one of the minority groups in a country. In the United States "almost three-quarters of the nation's poor resided in urban areas in 1985. The propor-tion of the low-income people living in extremely poor neighborhoods increased between 1970 and 1980, from 16 percent to 24 percent. The concentrated poor are mainly in a few of the largest cities." (U.S. House, 1991). We can predict that the children we will be serving throughout the remainder of this decade are the offspring of the children who lived in extremely poor neighborhoods in the 1970s and 1980s.

There is no desire to remain in the inner city or major population area. The inner city is old, crowded and not a very pleasant place to grow up. Those families that remain in the inner city are there either because they have no choice (mandatory residency for certain jobs), economics (either close to work, school, family) or lack of resources (can't find enough money to move and live outside the inner city). There are some exceptions. "Millions of children grow up in illiterate households. They do not receive the support they need to excel in school, which results in their starting off far behind their peers." (Hatkoff, 1992). Although the school system they attend offers the best instruction possible, there usually is a need to place more emphasis on the social needs. According to Project Literacy, U.S., children with low basic skills are nine times more likely to drop out of high school, eight times more likely to become pregnant out of wedlock, and four times more likely to become welfare-dependent than children with above-average skills. These children come to school with a greater abundance of social needs than children from the non-urban, suburban or rural population. Generally there are not enough assets to adequately provide for all the needs of these children. "Without basic skills a child's chances for future independence, productivity and success are greatly limited." (Hatkoff, 1992). The families remaining are raising their children as best as they can. The inner city is usually not represented in the children's books we have in the collection. Although there has been some new titles depicting the inner city child and a way of life that may be familiar to them, the titles are not in abundance. Our role as school librarians will continue to expand in an effort to provide the specialized assistance necessary to serve these students.

The children are the future of the community. What they are and will become is a reflection of how they developed. Think of the children as the seeds of a growing crop. If you sow the seeds in fertile soil, provide nutrients, water, light and heat, the seed will grow into a productive crop, and produce more seeds to sustain itself. Lacking any of the necessary ingredients the crop will fail or produce a less than desirable product or yield.

If we view schools as growing fields and all teachers as growers then we can see that some of the crops grow very well, while others barely survive and some wither and die in the ground. The school library media specialist can be the master grower. The expert in crop development. A master grower is able to diagnose the crop and recommend the remedial action or ingredient to correct a deficiency. We are the fruits of good growing practices. Just think back to your earlier growing years. Whether we had the best of all the ingredients or were saved by a caring grower and provided with better soil, nutrients, more water, moved to a brighter location or given some heat. We all developed well. The children of the inner city are not being provided with all the necessary ingredients in the proper amounts to produce well. Some are lacking the light, some the water and some are trying to survive (not grow) in very poor soil. School librarians must

IR056075

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Ken Haycock
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

understand how children learn to read, then they can provide the proper instruction. Lea-Ruth Wilkens said in her book *Supporting K-5 Reading Instruction in the School Library Media Center*, "Only if school library media specialists have a sound understanding of the reading instruction process will they be able to guide readers on how to use the wealth of printed materials available to them in the school library media center." (Wilkens, 1984). There are a variety of sources to learn how children read. *The Power of Reading*, by Stephen Kashen offers the research background of various studies to confirm the fact that continuous reading induces better readers, writers and thinkers. Now is the time to provide that healthy start or remedial action to produce the best and strongest crop that can be produced.

Another significant factor in the literacy development of children is modeling behaviors. "Modeling has the most profound effect on learning. We are all modified models of our environment." (Wilkens, 1984). The history of mankind confirms this. Who is your heroine or hero? Picking a famous person and following their footsteps is a method we have pursued at sometime or another. Start with answering the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up? Think back to when you were first asked that question. I'll bet you named an occupation or profession and had a famous person in mind that you wanted to be like. Some of us picked a parent or older family member, others may have selected a famous entertainer or film star, sports figure or social leader. And as we grow older we may have had changed our attitude toward that person or the profession. "Your beliefs, behavior and manner reflect your development. If your developmental environment was rich then you acquired skills faster and they were reinforced into a stronger foundation upon which all others issues, skills and attitudes rest." (Wilkens, 1984).

Emotional and social problems manifest in the actions of the children in a variety of ways. "Some children may suffer from emotional problems because they are neglected and abused or live in home environments which do not provide a feeling of being loved and nurtured. Negative attitude toward reading may develop in children who come from home environments in which reading is neither nurtured nor reinforced by a positive regard for the learner or the teacher or it may also occur in homes where reading is highly valued but not communicated to children by adults (role models) who unthinkingly take it for granted that children recognize the importance of reading. The attitude of the classroom teacher also contributes to positive or negative influences regarding reading." (Wilkins, 1984). We need not only be aware of the social and emotional problems that face our inner city youth, but we must have a variety of solutions to help them deal with the issues. I think that we cannot solve these problems alone. However, we must be a part of the solution. Understanding the issues and affects on the children will help us design an adequate approach to the children.

We must be desirable models for the students to follow. A potted plant will grow toward a light source, it will bend. The bending will affect the development and shape of the plant. With daily rotation a potted plant can develop into a straight, tall and healthy specimen, without rotation it may be strong but slanted. Children, like growing plants, need the daily attention of the grower to develop into well-rounded, knowledgeable citizens of the community. The school library media specialist (Master Grower) and the teachers (growers) can provide this daily rotation in the form of new information of varied subjects, introduction to alternate sources of information, and reading for growth. We need to recognize not only the inadequately growing crops, but maintain the nourishment of the entire field or garden. We know as gardeners that what works for one group or crop or type of plant does not work for all group. As the growers know some crops need more light, others need additional water, or perhaps the soil is lacking the required chemical consistency and needs fortified with additional nutrients. Different groups need different ingredients. However, all the crops need attention, your attention.

I think we can all agree that reading literacy is a master key to success. What are some methods or techniques you can incorporate into your program of service to the children? Understand the students' backgrounds. The inner city may not be your background, but you need to get into it to understand it. What is the heritage, customs and traditions of the students being served. You must attempt to get to know what the students deem important and develop an approach from that information. Try not to force your views of life, learning and living onto your students. We learn from what we know to what we don't know. You need to establish what the children know in terms of what they

have experienced, how they live and how they view their world. Only then can you build a bridge from their limited experiences to the greater world of society's experiences. What is important to the children may be insignificant to you. However, the only way you can reach them is by placing a value on their comments, ideas, and issues.

Establish a fertile ground for the seed to grow. Present the children with a comfortable place to listen and read. A school library that is warm and inviting is a start. It can be a haven especially for children who don't have a place of their own to read in.

Feed the children stories that they like. Feed them by reading to them. Introduce stories that are short and funny. Capture their imagination with stories that may be familiar to them. Studies show the importance of children being read to at an early age in terms of developing reading and language skills. Yet many young parents lack the precedent of story time. Therefore, a tradition of reading and the importance of developing a lifelong learning habit of reading is not developed or ingrained into the memory and lives of the children. Offer to lead a group of parents in reading to their children. Set this up through a literacy group, or as a school library to host an after school program. You may be able to get assistance from local community groups that advocate helping others in the community.

Water the new plants. Encourage them to read anything and set up a routine for the children to tell their fellow students what they read about. I would suggest that you limit the amount of formal structure in this process. Too many rules or procedures, like too much water, can drown the imagination and creativity of anyone.

Provide the nutrients on a routine basis. Present the children with a variety of literature, rhymes, poems, folk stories, and ballads, and longer stories of children experiencing unfamiliar places and things. Develop displays of inquisitive things for children to experience and explore.

Oral reading appears to be similar to the tradition of story telling in ancient cultures. Before the printing press and mass quantities of textbooks and readers, our ancestors passed down the body of knowledge through oral tradition. The folk tales of every culture were handed down by word of mouth for centuries. "It is important to read to young children in order to acquaint them with the patterns of the literary or printed language." (Hillerich,1977). That is probably why folk tales were among the first types of literature to be printed.

Once you have picked a book appropriate to the interests of the group's age, both mental and physical, the book or story ought to be read without paraphrasing. There is no harm for children to hear a word or two that might not be in their listening vocabulary. Again that is how people, children and adults, learn; experiencing new words, ideas and concepts. "Oral reading should be done from a book that others do not have in hand." (Hillerich, 1977). Practice, practice, practice! Make up particular voices for each character. These voices should be as colorful as the costumes of a theater production. Children also need to play a part, their part in the oral reading process. They can share by reading to the rest of the group a small portion of a book or story they enjoy. "They may dramatize a story by the taking of parts of the characters and reading their parts directly from the book." (Hillerich, 1977). The other purpose for reading to children is to increase their interest in reading. Do you remember an interesting oral introduction to a book that made you want to read that book?

Another approach is to incorporate reading into the subject matter. You have heard of literature across the curriculum? David Moore, writing in *Developing Readers and Writers*, develops the concept that "literacy and subject matter instruction can be combined in elementary as well as secondary schools. This distinction is especially valuable because more and more elementary teachers are incorporating literacy instruction with instruction about the world." (Moore, 1994). He offers the following reasons for incorporating literacy instruction with subject matter:

1. Reading and writing are tools for learning.
2. Literacy requirements continually increase in school and society.
3. Each mode of expression requires distinct language abilities.
4. Each content area requires distinct learning abilities.
5. Readers and writers perform a variety of tasks that require distinct language abilities.
6. Content area teachers can teach content area reading and writing best.

Because content area sources and courses consist largely of language, the study of

content areas is really the study of language. We now understand more than ever before that the literacy requirements are increasing significantly as students move from elementary to secondary school. This is reflected in society as we evolve from an industrial-based to a technical/informational one (Cole, 1990; Resnick, 1987). The amount of sophisticated reading and writing abilities required of graduates is rapidly increasing as a result of the technical /informational deluge. The revolutionary changes in technology have affected nearly all occupations. Office workers of our parents generation were skilled in using manual typewriters, filing cabinets and single line telephones. Today's office workers need to be able to use word processing programs, computerized databases and multiline telephone systems, fax machines and electronic mail functions. "Jobs that call for predictable, simple routines are giving way to work that requires complex problem solving and decision making skills." (Moore, 1994). In order to develop these skills children must be able to read and write well. Literacy started at an early age can instill the tradition of reading and learning on ones own to become a productive member of the community and break the pattern of poverty that is burdening today's society. "Without basic skills a child's chances for future independence, productivity and success are greatly limited." (Hatkoff, 1992).

The major difference I have seen from working in an inner city school is the environment and cultural background of the children. We were not the same. Yet I tried to develop a sense of understanding their culture in order to show them reading literacy and reading tradition.

Notes

Cole, N.S. (1990) "Conceptions of Educational Achievement," *Educational Researcher*, 19 (3), 2-7.

Hatkoff, Amy and Karen Kelly Klopp. *How to save the Children*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Hillerich, Robert L. *Reading Fundamentals for Preschool and Primary Children*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1977.

Krashen, Stephen D. *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1993.

Moore, Davis W. et. al. *Developing Readers and Writers in the Content Areas, K-12*. 2nd. ed. New York: Longman, 1994.

Resnick, L. *Education and Learning to Think*. Washington, D. C.: National Academy Press, 1987.

U.S. House. Select Committee on Hunger. "New Perspectives on Urban Poverty and Microeconomic Development." Hearing 25 July 1991. Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1991. (Y4.H 89:102-9).

Wilkens, Lea-Ruth C. *Supporting K-5 Reading Instruction in the School Library Media Center*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1984.